

FIRST NESTING RECORDS OF THE HOUSE FINCH IN MANITOBA

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Recently, Bancroft and Parsons reviewed known sightings of the House Finch in the three Canadian prairie provinces up to and including the end of December 1990.³ They speculated on whether or not nesting would occur and if the House Finch would become regular in the region. In the time between the writing of that article and its publication, there were no fewer than three nesting records of the House Finch in Manitoba - one was in Winnipeg and two were in Brandon.

Details of 1991 Nesting Records

Dan Bulloch and Louise Vermette, who live in south St. Boniface, which is an eastern suburb of Winnipeg, discovered the nesting pair in Winnipeg. Three House Finches, two males and a female, appeared at their feeder on 28 May. One of the males settled into a fairly regular routine of visiting and was seen over the next few days by several observers including Dennis and Frieda Fast, Robert Parsons, Andre Courcelles, and Lewis Layman. After several attempts, this bird was photographed (Figure 1). Evidence of breeding was obtained on 28 June when the adults showed up at the feeder with three fledglings. (Not two fledglings as reported in *American Birds*.)²² Both the "regular" male and the female were observed feeding the young birds over the next few days. The second male remained in close association with the pair, but was not observed feeding the fledglings. The birds remained for a few days before disap-

pearing. However, in mid-July, a male and female House Finch began to visit the yard of Angus and Betsy Shortt until 25 August 1991.²⁰ It is likely that these were some of the same birds, with the correlation of dates and since it is a distance of only 1 km away.

In Brandon, on 27 June, Jean Horton observed a male House Finch at close range visiting her feeder in a residential area in the western part of the city. The bird remained for about 10 minutes and was observed in detail. This was the second report of a House Finch in Brandon. (An earlier sighting, overlooked by Bancroft and Parsons, was a male reported by Mamie McCowan on 29 April 1990 at her feeder in south-central Brandon. This bird was also seen by Barbara Robinson.) The first definite breeding evidence for the Brandon area was obtained on 8 July. Carole and Murray Sangster returned from holidays to find a male House Finch visiting a feeder at their home, west of the Agriculture Canada Research Station in Brandon. (Perhaps the same bird as Horton's sighting?) It was accompanied by six young House Finches. The young birds were being fed by the male. The visits continued over the course of a few weeks and all the birds were observed by Horton, Robinson and others during the period. Frequently, the male would fly to a hydro wire above the feeder and perch for a few minutes before approaching the feeder. Although the



Figure 1. Male House Finch visiting feeder in Winnipeg. He would later bring young to this feeder.

Louise Vermette

Sangsters searched their property and kept a close eye on the birds, a nest was not found. This House Finch family remained in the area until 15 September.

Shortly after the record of the Sangster nesting had been established by photograph (Figures 2 & 3), another occurred. On 19 July, Millie and Len Wenger, who live in the east end of Brandon, observed a male House Finch at their feeder. This bird was also seen by Harold Watson of Brandon.²⁵ Then, on 29 July, Bob and Jean Horton, Linda Seitz and the Wengers observed a male and female House Finch at the Wenger feeder. As in the previous instance, the male would perch on a hydro wire for a minute or so (Figure 4) before coming to a tubular pole feeder about 1.5 m above the ground. The feeder was situated in front of the kitchen window where the birds

came regularly to feed on Niger seeds. The male favoured a Colorado spruce (*Picea pungens*) in a neighbouring yard as a perch. This popular ornamental tree has been noted as a favourite nesting site.^{4,18} However, a nest was not found. On 21 August, four young were observed. They frequented the feeder for the next month. Later, the Wengers identified them as two of either sex, after the fall moult, when the red colouring of the males became apparent. The Wengers saw the young House Finches for the last time on 6 October 1991 and noted that the adult male had left one week earlier.

Thoughts and Theories on the Nesting Records While none of the nests were actually found, we can extrapolate to get some idea of clutch size, approximate nesting dates and other features of interest.

Although we do not know the exact number of eggs in each clutch, we do know the minimum number. The Winnipeg nest contained at least three eggs, while one Brandon nest had at least four eggs and the other had at least six eggs, based on the number of young fledged. These numbers are within the normal range of two to six eggs.¹⁹

According to Bent, nest building takes two days to a week to complete.⁴ Egg laying proceeds at one per day.¹⁹ Incubation lasts from 12 to 16 days.¹⁹ The nestling period ranges from 12 to 19 days.^{4,19} If we assume the parent birds brought their young to the feeders immediately upon fledging, we can extrapolate the following nesting dates. The Winnipeg nesting could have begun as early as 14 and as late as 30 May. The latter end of this range corresponds with the first observation of this family group. The Sangster



Figure 2. One of thirteen House Finches known to have fledged in Manitoba in 1991.

Jean Horton

nesting at Brandon could have begun as early as 21 May and as late as 6 June. This range could possibly be revised to a few days earlier, since the Sangsters only discovered the House Finch family after returning from vacation. The Wenger nesting at Brandon could have begun as early as 6 and as late as 22 July. The initial observation time corresponds with the shorter period. It would appear that Manitoba's House Finches had little trouble fledging young, since the evidence favours a near minimal nesting period in at least two of three cases.

The dates for all three nests are somewhat later than those given in the literature which suggests late April as the norm for northerly populations to begin nesting activity.^{4,19} Since there were no resident House Finches on territory when the normal

nesting season began, however, Manitoba had to wait for migrants to arrive. In view of this situation, the later than normal start of nesting is not surprising. If the House Finch becomes a permanent resident in Manitoba, we can expect earlier nest records.

The House Finch is known to be "often double-brooded, sometimes treble-brooded" and generally reuses the same nest.¹⁹ Of the Manitoba nestings, however, only the Sangster nesting record at Brandon suggested that a subsequent nest might have been undertaken. Since only the male parent was seen with the young at the feeder, there was speculation that the female was possibly reneesting. If this was the case, however, it appears to have been unsuccessful since no further young appeared. Although the dates do not rule it out, it is unlikely that the same female was involved in both Brandon breeding records. The observations were at opposite ends of the city, a distance of 8 km. As well, we have not been able to find any evidence of polyandrous mating of the House Finch in the literature, at least while the first male survives. While the Wenger nesting was taking place, the first male was still tending his brood. It is possible that the comparatively late dates of the Manitoba nestings discouraged any reneesting.

The presence of the extra male accompanying the Winnipeg pair is intriguing. It may be an example of a nest helper as already documented in the House Finch.²⁴ It was not observed feeding the young, but Bulloch and Vermette stressed that they were away at work all day and could have missed such behaviour. Certainly, the tolerance displayed by the other two adult birds toward it supports this possibility. The "regular"



Figure 3. Half of the largest known brood of House Finches found to date in Manitoba.

Jean Horton

male was much more colourful than the second male. He, by his colouring, his regular presence and his feeding of the young birds, was assumed to be the parent.

Recognition of House Finches Although the three nesting records described are the first ones that we know of, it is possible that others have been missed. The problem is that many observers are simply unaware of the presence of House Finches and misidentify any that they see as Purple Finches. In an attempt to address this problem, we wish to note the following:

The House Finch is slightly smaller and more slender than the chunkier Purple Finch. Proportionally, the tail of the House Finch is longer and less noticeably notched, while the bill is smaller. The head is flatter than the more peaked crown of the Purple

Finch.

The male House Finch has the red colouring restricted to the crown, upper breast and rump. This contrasts with the brown back and wings. Most adult male Purple Finches have a more extensive red wash throughout their plumage. The belly and flanks of the House Finch are fairly heavily streaked, while the Purple Finch usually has little or no streaking there. In general, the House Finch tends toward more red and orange colours, while the Purple Finch tends toward more pink and rose colours. However, there are exceptions to this rule in both species.

The female House Finch has a relatively plain, unmarked face with only faint streaking, which is more reminiscent of the facial pattern of a Pine Siskin than a Purple Finch. The female Purple Finch has strong facial



Figure 4. Male House Finch on wire, a sight Brandon birders were treated to in the summer of 1991.

Bob Horton

markings consisting of a light eyebrow, dark "ear" patch, and a dark "mustache." Although the distinguishing features of females require a better look, they are less variable and, therefore, more reliable.

Evolving Trends in the Manitoba House Finch Population

The House Finch's range expansion into Manitoba is well underway. The first sighting of House Finch in Manitoba was in 1983.²¹ David Lambeth, a regional editor for *American Birds* Northern Great Plains Region, informs us (pers. comm.) that the first sightings of House Finch in most states preceded the first nesting record by about 10 years. The Manitoba situation, with a nine year interval, fits this pattern very closely. As all three nests succeeded, it looks as though the House Finch may become at least a summer resident in

Manitoba. Time will tell if it becomes a permanent resident.

In order to speculate on whether or not we might expect the House Finch to continue nesting in Manitoba, it is necessary to examine its nearby northern range.

The Winnipeg nesting can be seen as a natural northward expansion of the breeding range along the Red River Valley. This would mean there is now a continuous breeding range all the way south to the well-established eastern North Dakota population. This theory is supported by the many sightings along the Red River Valley.³ These stretch from just north of Winnipeg, south to the U.S. border. Most sightings in Manitoba are from this area. It is especially interesting that such a large number (seven) of these occurred in the year immediately before the discovery of the nesting birds. There may well have been, therefore, some undiscovered nests between the only known Winnipeg nesting record and the House Finch's North Dakota range. This is quite possible with so few birders in Manitoba. The nesting record in North Dakota nearest to Winnipeg is at Grand Forks - $225 \pm$ km away.

In contrast to the Red River Valley region, there is no tradition of House Finch sightings in the western part of the province. Indeed, before 1991, there were only two sightings anywhere in western Manitoba. These were the above mentioned sighting by McCowan, and one at Carberry, from 17 November to 4 December 1990.³ There are no others known from Brandon to the Red River Valley. There is, however, evidence that House Finches nested in the Minot, North Dakota, area in 1991, according to Lambeth (pers. comm.). Minot



Figure 5. Map of southern Manitoba showing the river valleys discussed in the text. Triangles represent the approximate nest locations.

is only 195 km southwest of Brandon. The Brandon nests, along with the one at Minot, show that the House Finch's westward expansion is still underway. More such records, therefore, can be reasonably expected.

At roughly 50 degrees latitude, the three Manitoba nesting records are the most northerly locations so far discovered for the eastern House Finch population. This isolation does not mean that the existence of a viable population of House Finches is out of the question.^{1,6,17,23} After all, the initially isolated population at Fargo, North Dakota, which appeared in 1987, more than maintained itself until the regular breeding range of the eastern House Finch population reached the area in 1990.^{3,5} There is a difference, however. The Fargo birds remained in the general nesting area throughout

the subsequent winters.³ By contrast, most of the Manitoba birds disappeared after nesting.

There were a few fall sightings of House Finches in 1991. These included a female in the Winnipeg area from 9-14 October, seen by Martin Siepman; a male and female on 8 October, and two males and a female on 18 October in Altona, all seen by Mary Krueger. Such sightings of fall migrants are intriguing as they suggest additional nesting birds in the province. After this flurry of sightings, only one bird remained to overwinter in the province. This was a male in Brandon at McCowan's feeder, with visits on 7 December 1991, 29 February and 7 March 1992.

The almost complete disappearance of House Finches from Manitoba after nesting is somewhat

surprising in a species which is considered to be relatively sedentary.¹ However sedentary the House Finch may be, it is by no means entirely so, as its explosive range expansion demonstrates. Kenneth Parkes, Curator of Birds at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, informs us (pers. comm.) "although many House Finches stay the winter, some of the eastern population had already begun to develop a migratory pattern when the breeding range was still confined to a relatively small area in the northeastern U.S." He further cites banding recoveries, of birds banded at their museum's field station near Rector, Pennsylvania. One was from Cookeville, Tennessee, which is a distance of 713 km to the southwest. Another was from Penfield, New York, which is a distance of 393 km to the northeast. There are other examples of movements of House Finches in the literature.^{1,8} Such findings support the theory that the Manitoba birds migrated to warmer climes. The opposing theory, that all the birds died, is unlikely as their disappearance took place when the weather was still mild. The death of so many birds would indicate an extremely unlikely high mortality.

If one accepts the theory that the House Finches migrated, the question is where they may have gone. A logical possibility is the northern U.S. Midwest region. The states of North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Nebraska are likely destinations. These six states are also a likely source of our House Finches.

In examining these states, one can notice a definite trend over the past few years. Ten years ago no House Finches from the eastern population were recorded on a Christmas Bird

Count (CBC) in these states.² However, in 1985 they began to appear.⁹ CBC results show a sustained increase over the years in all six states.^{9,10,11,12,13,14} In 1990-91, the most recent CBC season for which published data are available, the following totals were found: Iowa had 601 House Finches, Wisconsin 569, Minnesota 133, North Dakota 35, eastern Nebraska 52 and eastern South Dakota had 44.¹⁴ In the three western states, wintering House Finches are concentrated in the extreme eastern portions. This, along with the much larger totals recorded in the three eastern states, suggests a northwest movement into Manitoba in migration. As the numbers continue to build, it is logical to expect steadily increasing numbers of House Finches to migrate into Manitoba and nest here. This may be happening already. The following House Finch spring sightings have been reported as of 30 April 1992: in Brandon, a female visited Horton's feeder on 23 March; in Altona, a male and female on 29 March, and three males and a female from 19-27 April, all at Krueger's feeder; in Carberry, a male visited Doug and Margaret Tolton's feeder on 13 April; in Winnipeg, a male was at Siepman's feeder on 28 April, and a male and female fed at Rudolf Koes' on 30 April.

The remaining question is whether House Finches will winter regularly. The bird seen at McCowan's feeder, presumably overwintering, demonstrates that they should be able to, although it must be noted that the winter of 1991-92 was extremely mild. They did, however, also show up on the CBC's at Grand Forks and Minot in the winter of 1990-91.¹⁴ Those at Grand Forks definitely remained through the winter (Lambeth, pers. comm.) and the Minot birds were also believed to have done so.

These, in addition to the Brandon winter record, bode well for the House Finch to become a permanent resident of Manitoba in the near future.

For the Future This article would be incomplete without speculations about the further appearance of House Finch nests. All three pairs of finches nested in similar habitat. This consisted of residential suburban backyard settings with fairly mature trees, which has been noted as a favoured habitat by this finch in other locations.^{4,16} All were in large communities along major rivers. These also have been identified as prime House Finch habitat by various authorities.^{1,4,6,7,14} This apparent predilection for communities along river valleys has three possible explanations. The first is that House Finches are attracted to river valleys and tend to follow them. A second explanation is that humans are attracted to rivers, settle there and modify the habitat to make it more to the House Finches' liking. A third possibility is that because people are more numerous in such locations, the chances of detecting House Finches are much greater.

Using these criteria, some of the larger communities along the Red and Assiniboine rivers are definite possibilities for nests in the near future. Peter Taylor (pers. comm.) suggests the "Pembina Triangle" communities of Altona, Morden, Winkler and Carman as likely to have House Finches nesting in them soon. Certainly these towns have the right kind of habitat. In particular, Altona has had many sightings of these finches reported in recent years.

Another area is the Souris River Valley. Note that Minot, North Da-

kota, is along the same river valley. Once these most favoured areas (Figure 5) have been filled, the House Finch should continue its expansion by radiating out from the river valleys. Its ultimate range in Manitoba will become apparent only with time.

Although perhaps somewhat beyond the scope of this article, note that the Minot nesting record is also very close to Saskatchewan. The Souris and Qu'Appelle river valleys may provide access for the House Finch to begin making inroads into that province. The area between these two rivers, with an extension to the northwest as far as Regina, is a logical place to expect the first Saskatchewan nest records. While it may seem premature to be talking about House Finches nesting in Saskatchewan, note that this is what most would have thought about Brandon just over a year ago. By this time next year someone may be writing a paper on the first House Finch nest in Saskatchewan.

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sightings, putting Manitoba sightings into perspective. Mary Krueger, Martin Siepman, Rae Anderson, and Angus and Betsy Shortt provided information on sightings. Jean Bancroft encouraged us to write this article.

[Editor's note: In the summer of 1992, Saskatchewan's first known nesting of House Finches occurred in Regina, in the yard of Karen Sealise.]

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